"WHAT ARE YOU GETTING FOR CHRISTMAS?"
ISAIAH 42:1-4
LUKE 1:76-79
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("What are you getting for Christmas this year?") - A question much on the minds of many people, particularly the young, as we move closer to December 25. It's part and parcel of the season: the waiting, the excitement, the counting of days, the almost unbearable anticipation. One writer commented recently that "Christmas is the time of year when parents are honor bound to come through. If you make enough noise about anything within reason you'd like to have, chances are good it will be there on Christmas morning." (~~The Protestant Hour, December, 1972, James Wharton~~)

The business community has known that all along. Long ago they quit making suggestions to parents and began making their sales pitch to the kids at Christmas time, with spectacular success. In any case, a reasonably ingenious parent can insert enough uncertaintity into the process to provide for a little doubt, which in turn translates into high level excitement if you happen to be ten and want a bicycle. That, in turn, becomes the grist for lots of high level conferences in the neighborhood regarding the question I have chosen for my title: ("What are you getting for Christmas".)

That's very much the spirit of Advent, the season of expectancy, the time of year that calls us to look forward to the celebration of a birth, but beyond that to the future - our future, with hope and confidence, knowing that because of this birth the future, no matter how threatening, ultimately will be good. Now, I'm not so naive as to believe that everyone who experiences a little excitement at Christmas would put it in those words. In fact, it may be that this other business has become so all consuming that apart from the receiving of presents as a child, or the giving of presents to children - Christmas has very little meaning to us. ~~I'm not sure it's what we mean~~ intend, ~~but it's at least part of what we are saying when we allow that we really don't celebrate anymore because the children are gone~~.

Christmas is for children. Christmas is for the child in us. But Christmas it also a very adult matter: an idea that stretches our minds, a concept that calls for our best intellectually. ~~Christmas is for all men of all ages: it is an occassion for the child in us to laugh and sing, but equally an occassion for the adult in us to ponder deeply the meaning of the event - and the meaning of our lives in light of this event.~~

- an occassion to laugh + sing
- a vision that can inspire us long after the gifts are gone and the tinsel put away for another year.

What are you getting for Christmas?" A better approach might be to ask, "What did God intend to give the world in the gift of Jesus Christ? What is God about in sending a Messiah? What does God give us - the adult in us - at Christmas?

The answer, I would suggest will be found in the Old Testament - in the prophets - those men whose perception allowed them to see deeply into the heart of God: those men of vision who sensed that history was not an ever-repeating cycle - but a process that, ~~in fact~~, was approaching a ~~high point~~, a turning point. These men, ~~with one foot in the past~~, remembering God's mighty acts of deliverance in the Exodus, proclaimed that God was about to act again. In the fullness of time God would do something new in the arena of history: God would come again as he had in the past and this time all men would see it.

In the last part of Isaiah - God's coming act - takes the form of a Servant

~~The figure that emerges in the book of Isaiah, a portion of which was written by an anonymous author during the period of Babylonian exile, is the Servant.~~

Listen to the words of the prophet, speaking for God: "Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my soul delights. I have put my spirit upon him.." Who is the prophet talking about? Who is the servant? Some have felt that the prophet was talking about the nation of Israel itself. Israel was to be God's servant. Others have felt that the prophet was predicting the rise of another great leader from within the nation like Moses or David. Others have felt that the prophet was describing the Messiah.

Whatever the prophet intended, one thing is clear. Jesus identified with his words. Jesus saw his task in life, his calling, in terms of living out the concept of servanthood as it is set forth in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. That's why Isaiah keeps turning up in the Old Testament lessons during Advent. He may not have been consciously envisioning the birth of Jesus Christ, but he was coming very close. He was describing what God had in mind for the world.

In any case, the servant will be superbly equipped: chosen by God for the task, given the authority of God himself to do his work, pleasing to God in his faithfulness, empowered by God with his Spirit. And the assignment? God's intent? God's project on earth that the servant will perform? "He will bring forth justice to the nations." There it is - in a word, and what a word! Justice - for all nations. Furthermore, it is a project that will not terminate until the task is complete: "He will not fail", wrote the prophet, "or be

discouraged till he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his law."

What does God give the world in Jesus Christ? What is the adult in you receiving for Christmas? If the Old Testament is to be trusted the answer is Justice.

Now, I'm very much aware that that is an unlikely Advent theme: that Joy, Hope, Compassion, are far more compatible with our preferences during this season. I'm also aware that justice is a concern that we have delegated to that vocal minority in the Church called the social activists - the ones who keep rocking the boat with their inopportune outbursts: that we tolerate a little bit of it during the year, but for God's sake not at Christmas time! And that if your average Presbyterian Church assembled a list of its mission priorities - the estab lishemtn of Justice would not be very high on that list, if it got on at all.

But there it is, standing almost in bold faced type - right in the middle of the Advent Old Testament Lessons = right in the Bible, that is to say, for those who have concluded that Biblical Christianity and social concerns like Justice don't mix. There it is - right in the middle of Israel's prophetic literature, which Jesus used as the pattern for his ministry. Even if you wanted to ignore it - an honest Advent observance demands that it be celebrated too. "He will bring forth justice to the nations."

Justice is an important word in the Bible. In the Old Testament it is almost synonymous with another important word - righteousness. It means kindness, compassion, fairness, it happens when the basic rights of men are respected. The prophet Micah put it as simply as possible - "What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8) - Define by way of Joseph Story

The practical results of Justice and Righteousness? Another important word - "Peace." Thus Isaiah - "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given....of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end..." (Is. 9:6-7) And old Zechariah - voice restored "you child - will guide our feet in the way of peace."

Justice - Peace - in Advent? It sounds a little like a left-wing plot.

Christians owe the Jews a great debt here. For we are guilty of censoring the Bible: of picking and chosing what we want to hear, and simply elliminating those words and ideas that are not compatible with our particular political ideology. And the Jews keep

reminding us that you can't very well deal with the God of the Bible - or his Messiah - apart from Justice.

In 1933, in Stuttgart, Germany there was a debate between a noted New Testament scholar, Karl Ludwig Schmidt, and the great Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber. At one point Schmidt said, "The only real difference between Christians and Jews is whether Jesus was or was not the promised Messiah". And Buber said, "When our Messiah comes the dessert will blossom like the rose, and people will live together in God's own peace and compassion, God's own justice and righteousness. What kind of world do you live in, Professor Schmidt?" The poignancy of that question, of course, was the fact that the nation in which the debate took place - the nation that academically and artistically had become the flower of Christian Civilization - was preparing at that moment to rid the world of 6,000,000 Jews.

Christians owe the Jews a great debt for their insistance on integrity. They remind us that the only possible way of celebrating Justice as God's gift to the world in Christ is by living it out, by working for it in all the affairs of our own lives.

Christians believe that God's Justice has happened in Jesus Christ. Among all the other things that the birth of Jesus Christ means is this: in him God's own Justice has been planted in the hearts of men. He lived it: he identified with poor people, outcast people, sick people. He kept constant company with those kinds of people who ask for and demand justice today. He showed that justice is simply his love at work. He made it impossible for anyone who wishes to use his name to be comfortable with injustice.

And to celebrate his birth is to acknowledge that [redacted], and that he has left to us the prosecution of that prophetic vision: "He will bring forth justice to the nations." One writer puts it this way: "Though Christ has come in ages past, he continues to come again to offer us salvation. Where justice and righteousness prevail, there is Christ redeeming us and our society. Where persons live in harmony and peace, there is Christ saving life." (Harold Bales, Alive Now, Nov.-Dec. 73, P. 45)

You don't have to be terribly perceptive, it seems to me, to understand that what the world needs today is God's own Justice. And you don't have to be much of a Biblical Scholar it seems to me, to understand that to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ is to do more than pay lip service to God's agenda for his creation; namely Justice for all nations. - cite examples

Christians have a vision of the Kingdom of God: God's kingdom right here on earth. It is a vision that was born in human hearts when a baby was born in Bethlehem. That vision has inspired men to do justice, to work for justice, to die gladly for justice. The best of Western Civilization is a result of this vision begun long ago in the Bethlehem manger. It is no naive fantasy, no weak hope. It acknowledges that the prophetswere stoned when they talked about it: that Jesus Christ was crucified, not for gentle words of love, but for acts of honest justice. But the vision includes a resurrection and a promise that one day that Kingdom will come: one day justice and righteousness and peace will extend to the four corners of the earth.

Let that penetrate deeply this Christmas. Let that magnificent, soaring vision of God's Kingdom on earth lift up your hearts as you contemplate the Bethlehem birth.

It is what God has to give for Christmas. The next time you hear the Hallelujah Chorus, listen for it. It's there - in the middle, as the voices suddenly drop...

"the kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord, and of his Christ"

and then the soaring crescendo...

"And he shall reign for ever and ever." AMEN

Father, in the middle of preparing for our Christmas, we are inclined to forget yours. Keep us honest. Make us uncomfortable wherever we see injustice. And give us that best of all gifts - that confidence in your Kingdom which is breaking into our lives: through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN